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SUBJECT: OVERVIEW OF GEORGIA'S LEADING OPPOSITION PARTIES

REF: A) TBILISI 2437, B) TBILISI 2483, C) TBILISI 2662, D) TBILISI

2596

¶11. (SBU) Summary: Of the 191 political parties officially registered at the Ministry of Justice, 182 parties are formally operating, but only a few are really active on the political scene. The arrest of former Defense Minister Irakli Okruashvili (ref A) for corruption on September 27 acted as a catalyst for the majority of the leading opposition parties to form a coalition group, the United National Council (ref B). The New Rightists and Industrialists are the only major parties to abstain from joining the Council. Details of the major leading opposition parties - the New Rightists, Industrialists, Republicans, Conservatives, Labor Party, and Georgia's Way - are outlined below. End Summary.

Prospects of Unification Unclear

¶12. (SBU) One year before the parliamentary elections scheduled for fall 2008, the ruling United National Movement (UNM) seems likely to win a majority in the 150-member Parliament (to be reduced from the current 235 seats). Experts and media surmise that given the current electoral system for single-seat MPs, UNM will win the majority of the 50 single-seat mandates. (Note: Under the "winner-takes-all" system, the party which receives the highest percentage of votes in an electoral district takes all of the seats in the district - usually around 5 or 6. End note.) In addition, UNM is projected to win at least 30-40 percent of the remaining seats through the proportional party-list elections, guaranteeing a simple majority. Some opposition members believe that the UNM has configured the current election rules so they can take 80 percent of the party-list seats, even if they win only 40 percent of the popular vote, and guarantee themselves another constitutional majority.

¶13. (SBU) The prospects of the leading opposition parties, which had to rebuild following the Rose Revolution, are unclear. Despite the recent formation of the ten-party opposition coalition, the United National Council, the objectives of its various member parties remain vague and contradictory outside of their four core demands: 1) hold parliamentary elections in Spring 2008, as was originally mandated in the Constitution; 2) change the majoritarian system from winner-takes-all to a true single mandate system whereby each candidate is elected by the votes he or she receives; 3) change the Central Election Commission's composition to ensure political parity; 4) release alleged political prisoners.

¶14. (SBU) The opposition parties' leitmotif is "Georgia without Saakashvili" or "Georgia without the President" (ref C). Though the opposition's ideological and strategic tools for implementation are still in the formative stage, the newly coined slogan is supposed to recall the phrase "Georgia without Shevardnadze" used by the UNM in its ascent to power.

New Rightists

¶ 15. (SBU) New Rightists (NR) claim a formal membership of 16,000 and a well-developed network of regional organizations. Largely due to its strong representation nationwide, NR, in coalition with the Industrialists Party, was the only opposition group to overcome the 7 percent barrier in the March 2004 elections. The stated political values of the party are: limited government, rule of law, and personal dignity. Of the various opposition parties, the New Rightists have come closest to articulating a true party platform. In the upcoming campaign the party plans to focus on three domestic issues: a stronger separation of the branches of government, protection of personal property, and enhancement of job security. For the past year NR criticized the authorities for subordinating all three branches of government to a powerful president, violation of property rights, and arbitrary dismissal of employees due to political changes. NR will rely on these issues to widen the party's appeal. The New Rightists are led by longtime Chairman and MP David Gamkrelidze, and MPs David Saganelidze, Pikria Chikhradze and Mamuka Katsitadze.

¶ 16. (SBU) According to IRI polls, NR already has 5 percent of popular support, though the party leadership believes that they will win 25 percent of the votes "provided the 2008 elections are free and fair." The party has two weaknesses with the Georgian public: its association with big business and former President Shevardnadze. Many people still remember NR's last minute support for Shevardnadze at the November 2003 parliamentary session, the last under Shevardnadze's rule.

¶ 17. (SBU) In order to strengthen its chances, NR is taking steps toward reunification with its former election partner - the Industrialists party. At the same time NR will be trying to bring well-recognized faces into the party, including Ana Dolidze, former GYLA chairman, and her husband Irakli Kakabadze, leader of the Equality Institute. Both Dolidze and Kakabadze are living temporarily in the United States, and are actively critical of the Government of Georgia.

Industrialists

¶ 18. (SBU) Industrialists (aka Industry will Save Georgia), like the New Rightists, refused to join the demonstrations leading to the Rose Revolution in November 2003. Together with the NR, the Industrialists provided the quorum for the opening session of the Parliament, which many believe was rigged by Shevardnadze's Citizens Union of Georgia. The party, which is not perceived as radical, and its leaders, Giorgi Topadze and Zurab Tkemaladze, have traditionally been on good terms with the authorities. It overcame the 7 percent threshold in the 2004 election in coalition with NR, and has seats in Parliament. The politically moderate position of the party may be largely due to its business connections, as the party's core sympathizers are generally older members of the business community. According to IRI, popular support for the party has remained stable at 4 percent. With the proposed lowering of the election threshold from seven percent to five percent by President Saakashvili (ref D), the Industrialists may choose not to form a bloc with the NR and participate in the elections independently.

¶ 19. (SBU) In the past the party's leadership has advocated protectionist policies for Georgian business, often criticizing the IMF for their restrictions on Georgia's economic policies. At present, the party's main policies are still very similar to the NR's platform - especially as relates to protection of property rights and unhampered business development.

¶ 10. (SBU) Neither the New Rightists nor the Industrialists are members of the United National Council and are maintaining their distance since the formation of the Council around Okruashvili -- a figure they consistently criticized since he began his government career.

Republicans

¶ 11. (SBU) Republican party leaders characterize their party as

liberal, but in the European sense, since their platform focuses on protection of personal property, reduction of taxes, and a push to reduce the size and power of government. The party claims 3000 members throughout Georgia and 40 regional branches. According to party leaders, the party's weakness is undeveloped representation at the regional level. It relies on the strength of several well known leaders, David Usupashvili, MP David Berdzenishvili, Tinatin Khidasheli, MP Levan Berdzenishvili, and MP Ivliane Khaindrava, who rotate the chairmanship.

¶12. (SBU) Party supporters characterize the Republicans as the "party of intellectuals," and while many of its leaders are generally liked for their relatively moderate views and consistent logic, the party does not win many votes. Lately, the party has advocated the introduction of a "parliamentary republic" system that would greatly reduce the power of the President. The idea is poorly understood by the general public. According to IRI polls, the party has 4-5 percent of public support.

Conservatives

¶13. (SBU) Conservatives have formed a formal alliance or faction with the Republicans in Parliament, though this very coalition is said to be undermining the Conservatives' support. The Conservatives' main base, former supporters of Georgia's first, ill-fated President, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, reportedly have not forgiven the Conservatives for their coalition with the Republicans - who were the intellectual force behind the 1992 coup against Gamsakhurdia. According to IRI polls, Conservatives have approximately 3 percent of popular support. It is possible in the pre-election period the alliance may dissolve and the Conservatives may move closer to Konstantine Gamsakhurdia's Freedom Party (which is also making some strides in the current political atmosphere) or Salome Zourabichvili's Georgia's Way. MPs Zviad Dzidziguri and Kakha Kukava are the two foremost leaders of the Conservative Party.

Labor Party

¶14. (SBU) Like the Republican Party, the Labor Party has been in opposition since its establishment in 1995. Unlike the Republicans, the Labor Party lacks pluralistic leadership and depends on the popularity of its leader, Shalva Natelashvili. Most Georgian political observers do not consider Natelashvili a serious political figure, and the party has inflicted serious damage on itself by condemning the widely supported Rose Revolution. Circulating rumors that Natelashvili is financed by Russia are also contributing to his unpopularity. However, Natelashvili still maintains a base among the poorer segments of the population and those who have lost positions since the Rose Revolution. His popularity also has risen lately following the GoG's policy of curbing small street vendors, a source of income to many vulnerable families. Nearly all of the 10-11 percent of support for the leftist parties in Georgia goes to Labor, and the party should have little trouble getting into Parliament with a 5 percent threshold.

¶15. (SBU) The party's platform takes a strong socialist stance supporting free health care, free education, and widely available social services. The Labor Party also advocates nationalization of strategically important industries and supports restriction of the President's powers. However, Natelashvili's position as the leftmost Georgian politician is under competition from other leftist forces, including Koba Davitashvili's Party of the People and Jondi Baghaturia's People's Council.

Georgia's Way

¶16. (SBU) Georgia's Way, chaired by Salome Zourabichvili, former Minister of Foreign Affairs, does not have a clear platform, though the party generally advocates liberal values like human rights, freedom of speech and a free press. At a March 2007 assembly of the party, a much-quoted Zourabichvili said, "We have to bring back Georgian values; the tolerance and solidarity that we are losing today." Zourabichvili is very critical of any policies and steps taken by the authorities. While her party is a member of the United National Council, she prefers to maintain a distance from the coalition. Zourabichvili's haughty, French personality has alienated some of her potential party members and supporters, and in that sense, her "Europeanism" may not be widely appealing to the

public at large. Her party has not entirely recovered from losses in the 2006 local elections, and popular support for the party is around 1-2 percent.

Comment

¶17. (SBU) The main goal of the United National Council is to force the government to hold pre-term parliamentary elections in April 2008. The Council sees the measure as the main solution for the current political crisis that they themselves have engineered with the help of the departed Irakli Okruashvili. Beyond that, it does not offer any organized program for Georgia's political fortune or economic reforms. Taken separately, none of the above opposition parties have developed a consistent party platform of their own beyond attacking the current government. As the elections approach, the opposition parties may try to focus on concrete issues but at this stage, the parties lack a short-term or long-term vision for the country's future that can be easily communicated to the general public.

TEFFT